

# NOVAK DJOKOVIC

*– Interview by Dr Bane Krivokapic*





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***Whether he's on court or off, Novak Djokovic gives 100% of himself. His fitness and flexibility have helped him climb to the World No. 1 ranking. His humanitarian projects and on-court antics have made him a crowd favourite. Not only can he play and win the longest matches the game has ever seen (remember the 2012 Australian Open Final? Or Wimbledon 2013?), but he can play up to an international audience across dozens of media channels. And then return to do it all again in the next tournament in a different country, on a different surface.***

***The 26-year-old Serbian has taken the art of recovery to a whole new level, but the secret to his success, he says, is his team and family. They are the ones who have helped him become a 6-time Grand Slam Champ. Well, that, and eliminating gluten and sugar from his diet, as he tells us here.***

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2013** Won 4 ATP events
- 2013** Won his 3rd straight Australian Open singles title
- 2012** Claimed World no.1 ranking
- 2011** Claimed World no.1 ranking
- 2011** Won 5 ATP events and 3 Grand Slams
- 2011** Won his first Wimbledon singles title and US Open
- 2011** Won 43 matches in a row, the only player in the world to achieve such a run
- 2010** Won the Davis Cup trophy for Serbia
- 2008** Won his first Grand Slam at the Australian Open singles
- 2008** Won Bronze medal in the Beijing Olympics
- 2007** Won his second ATP Masters title in Montreal, making him No. 3 in the world
- 2007** Played the semi-finals of the French Open and Wimbledon
- 2004** Won his first ATP Challenger tournament in Budapest
- 2001** Triple European champion in singles and doubles
- 2001** Began his International career at the age of 14

***How do you feel after playing a match that lasts for many hours? E.g. Australian Open final against Nadal***

If you win the match, then you feel fantastic, no matter the amount of hours spent on court. But if you lose, then you can feel really bad, which is normal – you know you gave it all, you fought to the last drop of strength on court, and you lost. That is not easy to handle every time, especially in Grand Slams. But, this is a sport where you can always get another chance, every week there is a new tournament, new challenge. So, you learn from what happened, and turn to what's coming.



***How much time do you need to recover from such an extreme effort?***

Tennis trains your body and mind to recover fast from a very early age. Because the season is so long and we play week after week, we don't really have time to recover our energy to its fullest. You have to factor in different time zones, different climate, food, courts, balls... So your body is always adjusting to something and recovering from something. Not to mention your mind – you have to be able to resist the temptation to just stay in bed and give in to laziness after a long flight, training or match. You have to resist the urge to give up when

you lose a point, a game or a set because in tennis, you always get another chance. If not in this game, then in next one; if not in this set, then in the next one. If not this week, then there is the next one. So we get one or two times per year to fully recover. Everything else is just grinding, and not giving up when going gets tough.

***What is your recovery routine?***

I have a great team of people around me that do the best they can with their expertise to make me feel physically, mentally and emotionally ready for every match and every challenge, and they



**Image:** Djokovic vs Andy Murray during the final of the Australian Open, 2013 which he went on to win.

then help me to recover later on. We have a standard routine after the matches which I don't like to talk about, but it's not a big secret. We do the stretching part, ice-baths, massage and similar things that are common in our sport. The main thing is to find the right balance and to understand the true limits of your body.

***You give the impression that you are always physically prepared. What advice can you give to other athletes about fitness?***

Every player is different, and there is no unique rule or advice. My team and I, as an example, love to be in nature so most of the things I do, I try to do out of the gym if I can. I bike ride, swim, run, play football, basketball. Every day we focus on different parts of the body. My advantage is my flexibility. My muscles are elastic and I spend a lot of time on stretching because that prevents injuries and keeps my body fresh.

***How do you personally maintain your health?***

I have to thank my diet for that. Eating healthy food helps me stay energised, healthy, pain free and injury free. I talked a lot about this in my book *Serve to Win*. We are all different and one rule cannot apply to all of us, but I did give some advice on how to find the right formula for your body that will help you stay healthy and happy.

***What motivates you?***

Love. Love is what keeps me going every day. Love for life, for this beautiful sport, for my family and fiancé and my team. I enjoy playing tennis and love competing. The fact that I am successful at what I do gives me an incredible opportunity to help others less fortunate than I am. I am never lacking motivation to go out there and give my best.

***What is the mental game of tennis like? How do you prepare yourself in terms of psychology?***

I have certain techniques that help me such as visualisation, meditation, relaxation or quite simple things like walking through a park which does miracles sometimes, I must say.

***You often joke around on court – does this help your mental game?***

One of my mottos is to be who I am and not pretend to be somebody else. I think that kind of thinking got me to where I am. Apart from being very serious and business-like when I go out on court to play, at the same time I really enjoy those moments and sometimes I like to show it and share it with the crowd.



***I strongly believe  
that our body is  
able to heal itself***



**Who makes up your medical staff?**

I don't really have a medical staff. I mainly visit doctors who have high expertise in working with professional athletes and I've been very fortunate not to need any medical assistance in the past few years.

**Who do you travel with? A physiotherapist? A doctor?**

I don't travel with a doctor. We do all the necessary tests several times a year, so there is no need for him to be with me at tournaments. On the other hand, a physiotherapist is a crucial part of my team. I work with Miljan Amanovic, my close friend. We have been working together since 2007, when I was number three in the world. He helps me to recover, to prevent injuries and to get my physical condition in the best possible shape. He knows exactly

what I need in every moment, which is not an easy task. But, he does it in a magnificent manner, as you can see. We are together for 9 months of the year, and when Miljan is not able to travel with us because of his family, I work with another physio, Saša Jezdic, a great professional and expert. I also travel with Marijan Vajda, my tennis coach, and Gebhard Phil-Gritsch, a fitness coach. We are a team with a capital T.

**Who makes the decisions when it comes to your health, you, your doctor or your coach?**

I never try to make decisions on my own because even though it's an individual sport, it's a team effort in the end that really counts. So the whole team discusses everything that is affecting my game and career, including health.



**Right:** Djokovic during the Internazionali BNL d'Italia 2013, Italy.

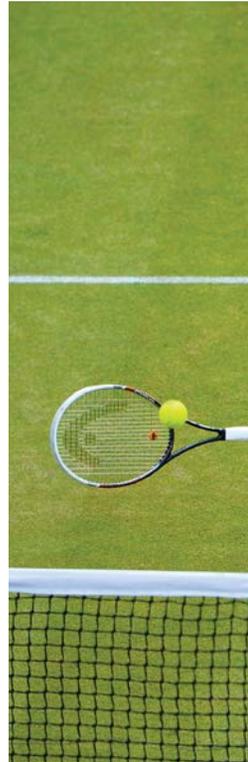
**Bottom:** Djokovic vs Nadal at the 2012 French Open.

**Bottom right:** Djokovic at the 2013 Australian Open.





**Left:** Djokovic after winning the Dutch Open in 2006.



**Bottom:** Djokovic at the 2012 US Open.

***How much do you believe in the doctors you see?***

I am very fortunate to be surrounded by great people who are excellent at what they do. I am certain that doctors I meet during the tournaments and between tennis events are all professionals, therefore there is no reason for me not to trust them. Thank God I am still healthy and young so I don't need their assistance that much. But I am definitely not the person who will take 'a pill for every ill'. I strongly believe that our body is able to heal itself if we give it time, and if we eat the right food. On top of that, I observe my body as a whole and don't think that a headache is just a headache. I always try to understand and respond to the signals my body is sending to me.

***You are obviously very close to your team. How does that contribute to your playing?***

Without their support I would never be so successful. They mean the world to me. Each member of my team has its own obligations, but we work best as a team. We talk about everything, listen to what everyone has to say and we respect each other. It is a co-operation based on trust, hard work and professionalism, which is a winning formula in my opinion.

***What is your relationship like with your coach?***

My coach, Marian Vajda, is like my second father. We are more than a coach and a player. He is a very emotional guy and we have a lot of fun off the court which is very important to me. Marian is a good spirit of the team who brings positive energy. He has contributed a lot in my career. Since we started working together I have won every singles title with him. We have gone through highs and lows, not just in my tennis career but also in my private life. He is the person I can talk to and he is like a part of my family.





**Left:** Djokovic at Wimbledon, 2013.

**Bottom:** Djokovic holding the trophy after his men's singles final match against Nadal at the Barclays ATP World Tour Finals in London.



***Now that you eat gluten free, how do you keep your energy up without large carbohydrate loads?***

Being gluten free today is so much easier than couple of years ago. Everywhere you turn you can find gluten free products so I am not really missing out on carbs. My diet is thoroughly explained in my book, so I definitely encourage you to read it.

***How do you feel now that you've given up gluten?***

I feel great. I feel more relaxed, more focused and more in control of my life in general. I've learned to sync food with my body's needs, giving it exactly what it wants, when it wants it. It probably sounds strange to say I feel more relaxed and at balance but it's true. I am at one with my body – I feed it with the right energy and in return I get a healthy and energised body. My mind and body are now more focused on performance than on masking or fighting pain.



***My mind and body are now more focused on performance than on masking or fighting pain***





Images: Djokovic after winning the 2008 (left) and 2013 Australian Open.

***Are you strict about any other foods? Have you cut out anything else?***

I am strict about being healthy. I don't enjoy feeding my body with junk food. It's funny how after a while of eating right, your body immediately detects the wrong food and rejects it. In the past, every time I ate something 'sinful' and took something that was not a 'healthy' choice, my body reacted immediately and I would regret going that way. So, I cut out gluten from my life and it was the best decision ever! I also cut sugar and dairy to certain extent. The bottom line is that I am not missing anything, I am replacing junk with good and that cannot feel bad to me or my body.

***How tough is it to be a high level tennis player?***

It is not easy, I can tell you that. It has its ups and downs. You have to sacrifice a lot in life to be on top. High level tennis players are like Spartans, in a way. From early morning till evening we have a strict schedule of things we must do – four to five hours of practice each day, no matter if it's 50 degrees outside. Fitness work, gym, running, ice-baths and a controlled diet are just a small part of it. Not to mention commitments to sponsors and tournaments. We travel so much, that sometimes we wake up not knowing which city or country we are in. When you are a top player, there is enormous pressure that you must win every single tournament and beat every opponent. But, I guess that's the case with every job. If you want to be the best at something, you have to work hard; pressure is a privilege that we must earn. I enjoy tennis – it's my life and it has given me everything. I breathe tennis and I must say it's the best thing that

has happened to me, so far. So all these things I mentioned I accept as a toll on the road and I keep going straight.

***To be a high level tennis player, what percent is talent and how much is hard work?***

It depends a lot from person to person, but I would say 10% is talent, 85% is hard work and 5% is luck.

***The ATP tour is played on many surfaces. As an athlete, is changing surfaces good or bad for you?***

It is always a challenge to change surface in a very short period of time. You have to adapt to different conditions, which is not easy, both physically and mentally. But tennis-wise, I guess the game would be quite boring if we constantly play on clay, for example. Different surfaces give opportunities to different players to show what they know, and this variety is always a good thing in sport.

***When are we going to see you in Doha?***

I play in Abu Dhabi every year in the Mubadala World Tennis Championship. If I find free time, I would be more than happy to visit Qatar, too. I respect all that the Al Thani family is doing for the country, and I have heard great things about Doha and its marvels. I am sure I will visit Qatar much before the FIFA World Cup in 2022.

Dr Bane Krivokapic